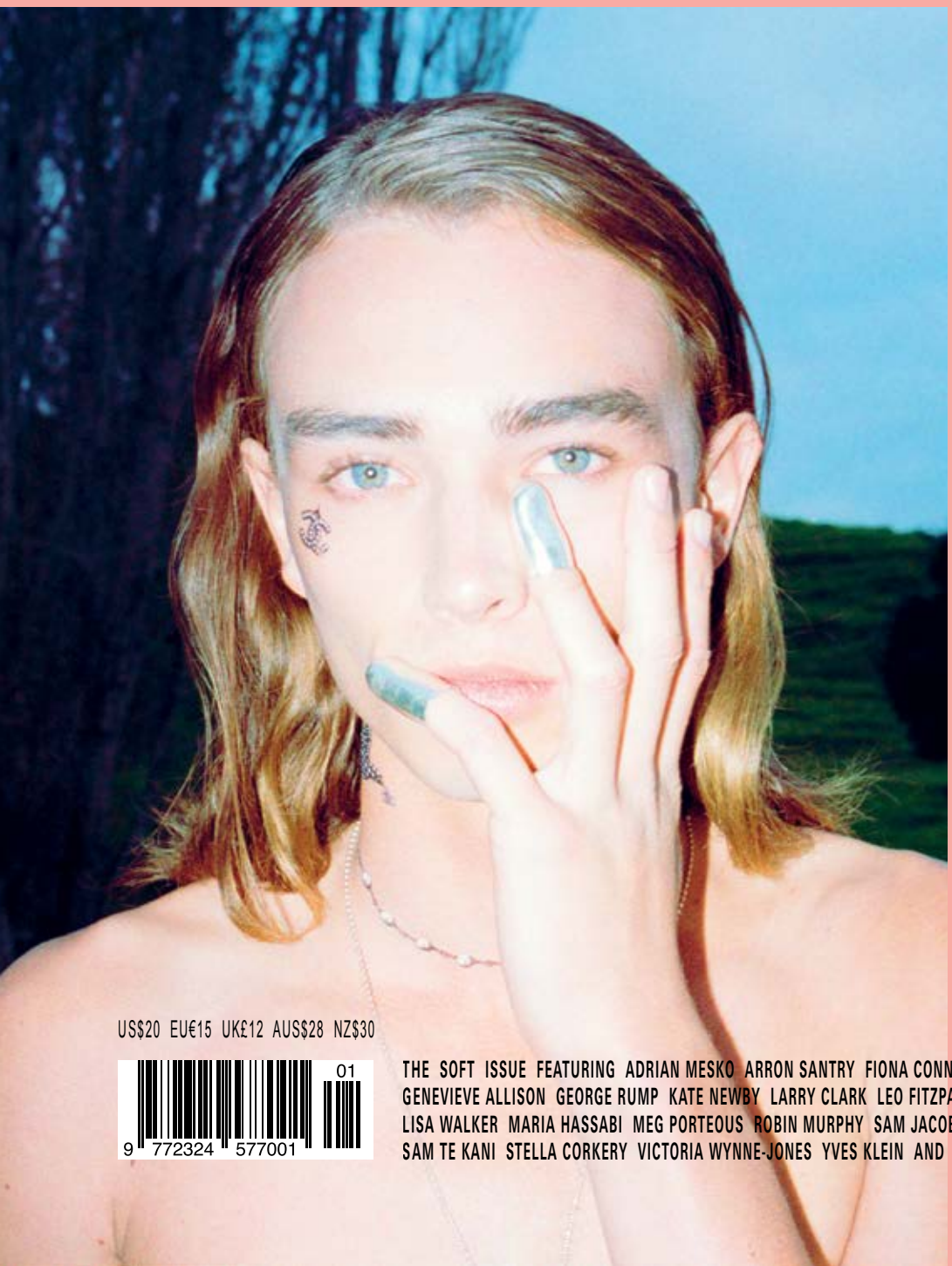
LE ROY 3



US$20 EU€15 UK£12 AUS$28 NZ$30

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THE SOFT ISSUE FEATURING ADRIAN MESKO ARRON SANTRY FIONA CONNOR GENEVIEVE ALLISON GEORGE RUMP KATE NEWBY LARRY CLARK LEO FITZPATRICK LISA WALKER MARIA HASSABI MEG PORTEOUS ROBIN MURPHY SAM JACOBS SAM TE KANI STELLA CORKERY VICTORIA WYNNE-JONES YVES KLEIN AND MORE

LE ROY 3 : SOFT

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DESIGN DD/MM/YY

DISTRIBUTED IN AUSTRALIA BY PERIMETER

DISTRIBUTED IN UK / EU BY ANTENNE DISTRIBUTION AND MOTTO DISTRIBUTION

PUBLISHED BY LE ROY PUBLISHING
PO BOX 7499 WELLESLEY ST
AUCKLAND 1141 NEW ZEALAND
WWW.LEROY.XXX

ISSN 2324-5778 PRINTED IN HONG KONG

FOR ENQUIRIES, SUBMISSIONS, PRESS RELEASES, ADVERTISING, PLEASE EMAIL HELLO@LEROY.XXX

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Yves Klein, *Fire fountain* and *Fire wall* in the exhibition "Yves Klein Monochrome und Feuer", Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany, 14 January–26 February 1961. © Yves Klein / ADAGP, Paris, 2015. © Photo Bernward Wember

There is an obvious distinction to be made between having a good idea and turning it into a thing in the world. However there is a lot to be said about the ecology of our unrealised or unrealisable ideas—those that simply fail the scientific method or yield little beyond their a priori state. By virtue of their novelty, vision, necessity, perhaps even beauty, they may precipitate subsequent ideas that could modify and inform new ideas, until some distant offspring might lead to a cataclysmic shift in our intellectual reality. At the very least, the purely synthetic function of ideas, insofar as they test the realm of possibility, serve as a repository for our collective desires as much as those that do ultimately transform our material and social conditions.

Objectively speaking, it requires some creative metrics to assert that Yves Klein's Air Architecture was a successful idea. It was radiant and visionary, but the problematics it engaged were many: it combined completely incompatible principles; it worked out plans and projects here social, there scientific, philosophical, meteorological, mystical and then studiously technical. Whether in essence the whole undertaking was a thought-project or to what end it posited serious proposals, is not without mystery, because at its heart Air Architecture had little to do with architecture—and this may have been its biggest problematic of all.

In short, Air Architecture comprises lectures, schematics, drawing and manifestos that imagine the dematerialisation of our built environment by substituting conventional construction materials with pressurised air systems. Instead of the heavy, inert materials which separate man from the outside natural world, Klein perceived that structural supports like roofs, walls, stairs and tables could be fashioned from the dynamic, immaterial forces of air and fire. Eventually man would evolve the ability to air condition the global climate to his comfort and, attendant to these developments, transparency in architecture would have deeply democratising effects. At once it would dissolve the indexical capacity of built structures to articulate claims to power and with the absence of optical barriers, individual psychic perimeters would break down and one would join a shared common space and consciousness—there would be no privacy or secrets.

Even for today's reader, wise to the rapid social transformations brought about by the digital age or radical technological propositions such as Smart Architecture, figuring a world in which Air Architecture is the reality is still an exercise for even the most febrile imagination. Klein sought patents, asserted that his theory of dematerialisation "denies the spirit of science fiction," and staged multiple mechanical experiments; further, he sought the professional collaboration of engineers and architects to help shift his ideas from the realm of metaphysical materialist philosophy to a physical, non-material technology. Yet despite all of these efforts and applications, and despite the exquisite drawings of Claude Parent, and Roger Tallon's intelligent technical demonstrations, Klein's imagination was far more reaching and nebulous than these discreet documents and experiments allowed for. As his collaborator, the architect Claude Parent said: "never in the least did Klein have a true relationship with architecture ... For Klein, architecture was rather a detail, an anecdote."[1]

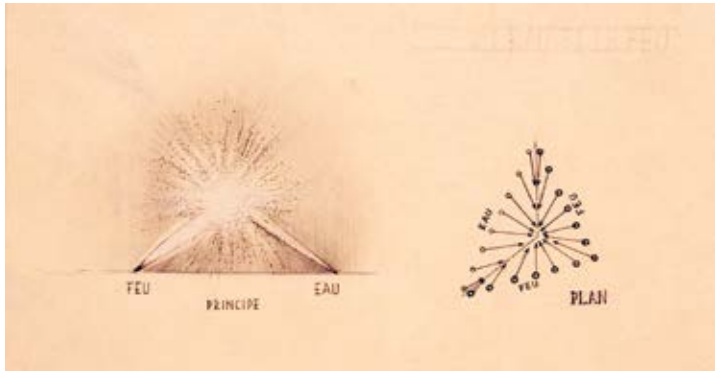
Before it is assumed that Parent's appointment of the word "anecdote" was euphemistic, it is worth (as an anecdote) considering the example of Nikolai

Fyodorovich Fyodorov and Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. Fyodorov, a little-known Russian Orthodox philosopher, futurist and cosmologist, devoted his life's work to advocating his "Philosophy of the Common Task", a system of beliefs which held that mankind will achieve salvation through the resuscitative resurrection of every living soul that ever lived (quite literally). And since Earth would not be big enough to accommodate all the people who had ever lived, room would be found for them on other planets. For this purpose, the pressing task of mankind should be cosmic exploration.

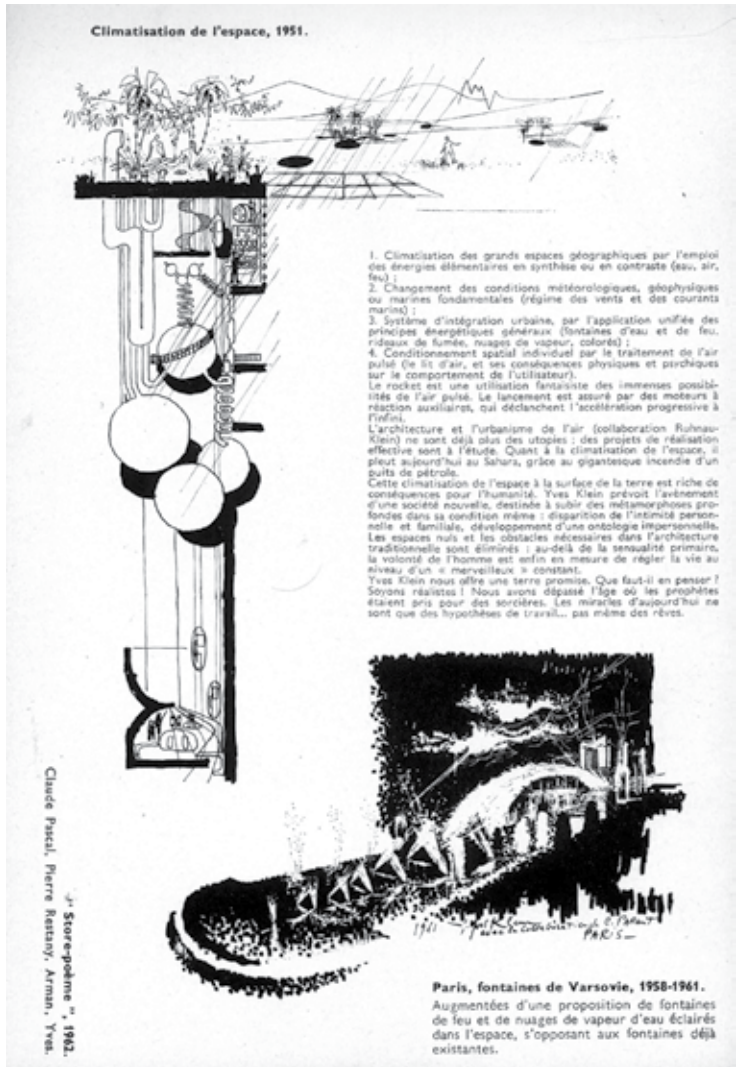
For obvious reasons the tomes of theurgic script Fyodorov produced on the subject went largely ignored, with the exception of a small patron audience at the Moscow Public Museum where he worked as a librarian. One such confident was Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, 16 years old when he met Fyodorov, who would eventually father the Soviet space program through his pioneering in aeronautical theory. To what extent Fyodorov influenced Tsiolkovsky cannot be determined, but it should be noted that objective field and theoretical work in space exploration and inter-planetary migration was not an obvious pursuit to the average 19th century Russian. Tsiolkovsky said of his achievements: "First, inevitably, the idea, the fantasy, the fairy tale. Then, scientific calculation. Ultimately, fulfillment crowns the dream."

The success of an idea is a non-linear equation; at the point of origination it is always fantasy.

Yves Klein, *Fire fountain* in the exhibition "Yves Klein Monochrome und Feuer", Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany, 14 January–26 February 1961. © Yves Klein / ADAGP, Paris, 2015. © Photo Bernward Wember

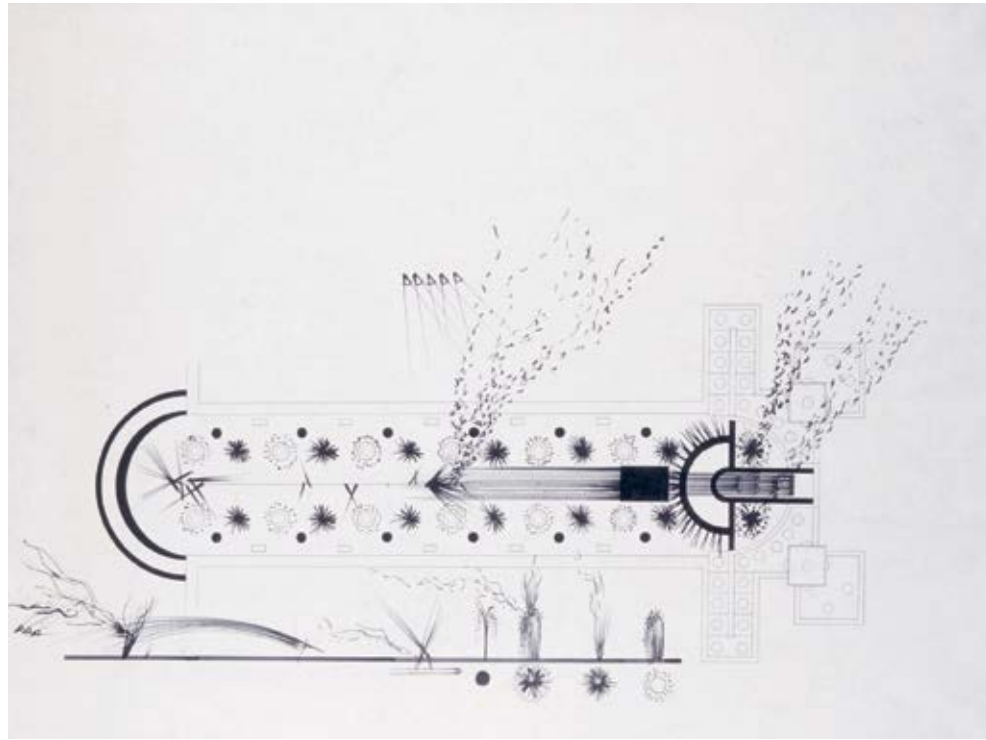


Yves Klein, *Water And Fire (Fire Fountains)*, ca. 1959. Ink and pencil on paper, 19,8 x 30,4 cm, Yves Klein with the collaboration of Claude Parent. © Yves Klein / ADAGP, Paris, 2015



Yves Klein, *Air Architecture*. 1958 *…Climate Control of Space…*, 1958–62. Yves Klein with the collaboration of Claude Parent. Published in the exhibition catalogue "Antagonismes 2: L'Objet", Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France, March 1962. © Yves Klein / ADAGP, Paris, 2015

Yves Klein. Photograph of the Air Architecture maquette (maquette made by Tallon- Technès) in the exhibition "Antagonismes 2: L'Objet", Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France, March 1962 . © Yves Klein / ADAGP, Paris, 2015



Yves Klein, Project for the "Fontaines de Varsovie", Palais de Chaillot, Paris, ca. 1961. India ink on tracing paper mounted on canvas, 67 x 89 cm. Yves Klein with the collaboration of Claude Parent © Yves Klein / ADAGP, Paris, 2015

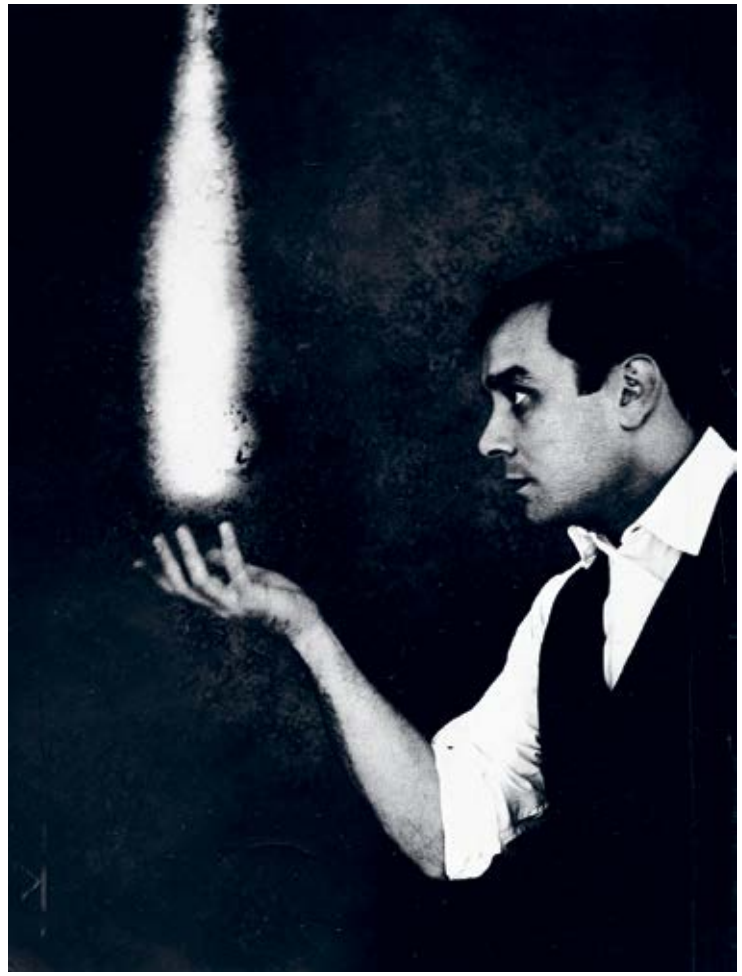
In ideas, Kant saw that necessity appears in its purest form. Whether the Space Race, arguably the mother of all invention, was born of "necessity" was a question that didn't go unasked at the time. In a lecture at the Sorbonne two years after the 1957 launch of the first man-made object into space, the USSR's Sputnik 1, Yves Klein declaimed that it will not be with rockets, sputniks or missiles that mankind will achieve the conquest of space, for then he will just remain a tourist, but with his sensibility. "What is sensibility? It is what exists beyond our being, yet is forever a part of us. Even Life itself does not belong to us; it is with our sensibility that we are able to purchase Life. Sensibility is the currency of the universe, of space, of Nature. It allows us to purchase LIFE in the first state of matter! Imagination is the vehicle of sensibility! Transported upon imagination, we attain LIFE—life itself, which is absolute art."[2]

What is clearly expressed through the thinking of mid-century futurists such as Klein is that even if they did not support the political or social forces incentivising scientific development, the events in themselves initiated a paradigmatic shift in their sense of agency in the world that was more ontological than technological. In the resulting intellectual milieu, many somewhat contradictory notions abounded on the relationships between art and industry, society and technology and their cosmic mandates vis-á-vis each other. For instance, notwithstanding this reflection on astronautical praxis, Klein did in fact pursue with Roger Tallon, designer of the French High Speed Train (TGV), the prototype for a pneumatic rocket. Klein reconciled *his* use of technology as guided by a "spiritual and vital need," making a distinction between the production relations that informed his own probing of science to those of the greater political-industrial apparatus. In materialism he found oppressive bourgeois Enlightenment concepts ("Materialism, all that quantitative spirit, has been recognised as being the enemy of Freedom"[3]) and held neo-Gramscian notions of building didactic enclaves that would challenge the existing material and ideological processes in art and society. This School of Sensibility would reject closed surroundings and return to Eden through an activation of the spirit brought about by being at one with the forces of nature by way of technological intervention of those forces.

In this one concept alone, we get a sense of the inviolate positivism of Postwar consciousness (the social objectives of the modern movement, a faith in the boundless power of science and technology to direct the blind forces of nature) subject to a mechanistic nature-knowledge, and manifesting a variation of human redemption that is activated by man's authority over the natural world. The *necessity* at the centre of Yves Klein's ideation (and Fyodorov's for that matter) is biblical, ecological and fundamentally humanistic. Who is our enemy? asks Fyodorov, "Nature is our temporal enemy, but our eternal friend." And Eden, in Klein's estimation, is "to live in nature [without needing a roof or wall] with great and permanent comfort ... the whole earth air conditioned."

Curiously, these ideas about Eden and redemption envision a seemingly wholly dystopian prospect: that man thoroughly regulates nature.

Klein insisted the universe should be at the heart of man, not vice versa, but the privileging of human scale as the fundamental unit of spatial analysis is still



Yves Klein, *The Dream of Fire*, (IMMA 41) 1961 ca. Artistic action of Yves Klein . © Yves Klein, ADAGP, Paris, 2015. Collaboration Harry Shunk and Janos Kender © J.Paul Getty Trust. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. (2014.R.20) Gift of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation in memory of Harry Shunk and Janos Kender

deeply human-centric in its thinking. It will only be through a deep, anxious humanism that mankind will exert any constructive work towards "collective tasks". The critical element missing from Air Architecture in 1959 was precisely that of collective necessity. But nearly 60 years later, the need to control the earth's atmosphere is showing itself to be humankind's next greatest imperative effort.

For those whom historiography is not an essential task, one might conclude that Klein may have foreseen that the history of architecture will not chronicle biographies or the vicissitudes of style, but will be a story of man's struggle against the antagonistic forces of nature.

1. Noever, Peter and Perrin, Francois, Eds., *Air Architecture.* Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004. p. 103.
2. Yves Klein, speech delivered on the occasion of the Tinguely Exhibition in Düsseldorf (January 1959), in *Overcoming the Problems of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*, Spring Publications, New York, 2007, p. 62
3. Ibid., 80.